Appalachia

Volume 72
Number 2 *Appalachia Summer/Fall 2021*

Article 3

2021

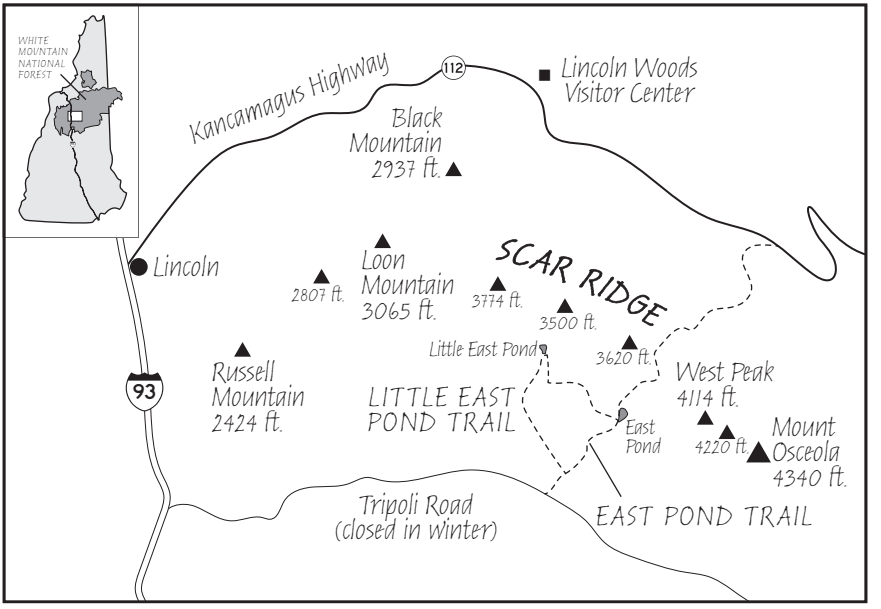
The Story of Scar Ridge: A Trailless Tangle in the Southern White Mountains

Steven D. Smith

The Story of Scar Ridge

A trailless tangle in the southern White Mountains

Steven D. Smith



Scar Ridge's glistening slides, visible from miles away, nestle ominously between the Osceolas and Loon Mountain. ABIGAIL COYLE/APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB

For peakbaggers pursuing the list of New England's Hundred Highest summits, climbing trailless Scar Ridge, in the southern White Mountains, is a rite of passage. Dark, massive, and densely wooded, its northwest face raked with glistening slides, "the Scar" looms ominously across the valley from the Lincoln Woods Visitor Center.

Perusing Scar Ridge hike reports on newenglandtrailconditions.com, one finds such phrases as *hard bushwhack . . . tight scrub . . . pretty thick up there*

. . . climbing over monster sections of blowdowns . . . 3 pounds of spruce and fir needles down my back . . . lots of cuts, bruises, and scratches . . . and so forth.

A lucky few find the going easier: *This peak gets a bad rap . . . not that bad a hike at all.* But it's safe to say that for most, it's *an adventure for sure*.

Early Appalachian Mountain Club Ascents

Long before the era of peakbagging and internet trip reports, this 3,774-foot[1] mountain—the high point of a long, multi-peak ridge linking Mount Osceola with Loon Mountain—beckoned to AMC explorers.

Probably the first recorded ascent was in 1871, by Warren Upham, who collected rock specimens from the top of the northwest slides while working for Charles H. Hitchcock's New Hampshire Geological Survey. Six years later, Upham, a founding member of AMC, wrote of the mountain in "Unnamed Mountains between Mt. Hancock and Scar Ridge" (*Appalachia,* vol. 1, no. 1):

> Scarred on the south side by a landslide of a few years ago, it is not less conspicuously marked on the north side by precipitous ledges that occur near the head of a deep ravine. Perhaps these are the marks of great slides that occurred centuries ago. Otherwise, this mountain is covered with a dense growth of spruce and fir.

Upham recalled that on his collecting trip in 1871, his hammer flew off its handle and "went off, bounding merrily down, tick, knock, whack, clink, to the bottom, hundreds of feet below. It was not searched for, but a liberal reward will be cheerfully paid to the finder."

In 1877, the south-side slide mentioned by Upham drew the attention of two other AMC trampers: Frank Wigglesworth (F. W.) Clarke and Gaetano Lanza. In "An Ascent of Scar Ridge" (*Appalachia,* vol. 1, no. 4), Clarke and Lanza noted "a large mountain conspicuously marked with a scar" seen while traveling up the Pemigewasset River valley. The locals seemed to know nothing about it. The darkly wooded peak was known only by the "ubiquitous appellation" of Black Mountain.

1 This elevation of Scar Ridge's west knob, long considered the highest point, comes from the U.S. Geological Survey 7½-minute Mount Osceola quadrangle. But using data from the recent lidar survey, AMC cartographer Larry Garland calculated a higher elevation on the east knob: 3,780 feet.

> Quite naturally, a mountain so conspicuous and so little known excited our curiosity. We felt that it ought to be looked after and attended to, or, in other words, climbed, measured, described, and brought properly under respectable Appalachian control.

F. W. Clarke (1847–1931) was a renowned chemist and geologist who was known as the "Father of Geochemistry." In the 1870s he was a professor at the University of Cincinnati; he later served four decades as the chief chemist of the U.S. Geological Survey. During summers between 1874 and 1877, Clarke, often accompanied by Charles R. Cross, recorded nearly 700 barometric measurements of elevations for summits, cols, hotels, bridges, and other locations across the White Mountains. His findings were published in *Appalachia*, vol. 2, no. 2. Much of the time he was based at Sanborn's Hotel in West Campton. One of his last objectives was the intriguing slide-scarred mountain that loomed to the north.

Geochemist Frank Wigglesworth Clarke became obsessed with the ridge in 1877.
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Gaetano Lanza (1848–1928), son of an Italian count, was a noted engineer who was on the faculty of MIT for nearly 40 years, serving as professor of theoretical and applied mechanics. His 900-page textbook, *Applied Mechanics*, was published in 1885 and went through at least nine editions. Lanza was an avid mountain explorer. In addition to the Scar Ridge account, he penned *Appalachia* reports about climbs of Mounts Kinsman and Garfield.

On the morning of August 11, 1877, Clarke and Lanza set off from Sanborn's Hotel by horse and carriage. They were equipped with "mercurial barometer and tripod, aneroid and thermometer, compass, pedometer, and lunch-bag, bound upon a journey of investigation and discovery." They rode ten miles north up the Pemigewasset valley stage road to Woodstock, then five more miles north and east along Eastman Brook into the remote area known as Thornton Gore. This hill farm community was in existence from

1804 to 1900 and peaked in the mid-1800s. The Gore encompassed 2,600 acres and included 22 hill farm sites with nearly half the land cleared for crops, orchards, or pasture.[2]

From the valley's open fields, the two explorers could see the surrounding mountains. For some distance the shape-shifting foothills obscured their objective, and when the explorers did catch sight of it, a south-thrusting spur ridge concealed the slide. The summit appeared lower than expected. Around 11 o'clock they reached Merrill's, the last occupied homestead in the valley. Before continuing on foot, they queried Mr. Merrill[3] about the slide's location. His sons had been to the slide, but their directions were vague: A logging road led toward the mountain, and a brook flowed down from the slide.

Clarke and Lanza followed the Thornton Gore road a half-mile farther to an abandoned farmhouse,[4] where the elevation was measured at 1,423 feet. They found the logging road and followed it into a cut-over area. Here they located a brook and traced it through flat and featureless terrain, uncertain of their course. Then the slope steepened, and the brook began tumbling over small cascades. Suddenly, a mile and two-thirds from the last farmhouse, they came to "a heap of gravel and stones, fringed with fallen timber." They had reached the foot of the slide. The elevation was computed at 2,255 feet.

> A more clearly marked slide could hardly be imagined . . . Above, as far as we could see (but we were far below the portion visible from the valley), it presented the appearance of a cleanly cut gully, perhaps fifty meters wide, following the sinuous course of the brook . . . Around bend after bend, and curve after curve, we followed up the gravelly bed of the slide.

2 For a summary of the history of Thornton Gore, visit whitemountainhistory.org/Thornton_Gore.html.

3 Edmund Merrill and his family, including sons Hiram and Augustus, were living there at the time. In 1880 the farm included 216 acres, of which 95 acres were cleared. It produced wheat, corn, potatoes, buckwheat, hay, butter, and maple sugar. The site was first settled by Edmund's father, Daniel, in 1815. The farmstead was abandoned by the early 1890s. The foundations of two connected dwellings remain at the site, along with bricks from a blacksmith hearth. (The source for this is a registration form for the National Register of Historic Places, filled out by Justine B. Gengras in 1988.)

4 This was the D. M. McDermid farmstead, first occupied around 1830 and abandoned by 1860. In the 1930s the site was used for the Tripoli Camp of the Civilian Conservation Corps. In recent years it has been a well-used car camping location.

The pair of explorers trudged upward for a mile at a "tolerably steep" grade, with only one detour out of the brook bed to bypass a cascade with overhanging walls. Finally, they reached the steeper part of the slide.

> We found ourselves at the foot of a steep, rocky incline, sloping at an angle of about thirty degrees, and with a vertical height of perhaps two hundred metres . . . Upward we toiled over smooth and slippery sheets of gneiss,[5] which sometimes overlapped like shingles upon a steep roof, and were washed completely bare of soil.

As they climbed, views opened southward to Plymouth, Mount Cardigan, and distant Mount Kearsarge. Higher up, the slide narrowed, and from its tip they scrambled through a belt of brushy, mossy evergreen woods and stood atop the eastern summit knob[6] of the mountain.

> We found ourselves upon the highest point of a long, narrow ridge, heavily wooded, and falling off steeply upon both sides. Only faint glimpses of views were to be had between the trees, but we saw enough to realize that if the summit should be cleared it would command an admirable outlook over the valley of the East Branch, with a fine sweep to the south and west also.

Thunderstorms were threatening, so they stayed on the summit only long enough to take barometric readings, calculating an elevation of 3,824 feet. They estimated the distance from the Merrill homestead at three and a half miles "with no real difficulties on the way."

The descent was "rapid and uneventful," and they began their homeward ride from Thornton Gore at 6 o'clock in the evening. They were soon lashed by a strong thunderstorm and rode the last five miles to Campton in darkness, trusting to the navigational savvy of their horse.

Naturally, Clarke and Lanza claimed naming rights to the peak:

> Of course, having climbed and measured the mountain, we felt bound to give it a name. Accordingly, we propose for it the descriptive title of Scar Ridge. It is a long narrow ridge, and it has numerous scars in addition to the great slide.

5 According to the *Bedrock geologic map of New Hampshire* by J. B. Lyons et al. (U.S. Geological Survey Data, Series 215, 1997, the bedrock on the slide is Mount Osceola granite.
6 There are two summit knobs on Scar Ridge of approximately the same elevation.

As seen from Lafayette it appears as a ridge deeply scarred. From almost every point of view the name befits the character of the mountain.

In 1881, the name *Scar Ridge* appeared on the second issue of cartographer (and founding AMC Treasurer) Henry F. Walling's map of the White Mountains. The map was originally published to accompany vol. 1, no. 3 of *Appalachia* in June 1877. Warren Upham drew the contour lines.

After being mostly forgotten by hikers for nearly a century, Scar Ridge rose back to prominence in AMC circles in 1968 when the New England Hundred Highest list was created by members of the AMC Four Thousand Footer Club. Writing in *Appalachia* (vol. 37, no. 1), founding club member Albert S. Robertson suggested that climbers ascend the west knob of the mountain from Little East Pond: "Thence the going is quite easy if you slab from E. to W. on the S. side of the mountain, climbing high up and around to the ridge, utilizing old lumber roads. The high point is hard to locate but seems to be at a spot on the broad summit plateau where there is a tree on a rock with, directly underneath, the remains of an old lean-to."

My Early Scar Ridge Bushwhacks

My own acquaintance with Scar Ridge dates back to 1987, when I teamed up with Mike Dickerman for a springtime traverse using the recommended route from Little East Pond to the main summit. The going was not easy! We continued across the several peaks to the east, including two on the New Hampshire Hundred Highest list: Middle Scar Ridge and East Scar Ridge. A few years later I made a second traverse, this one on snowshoes with an AMC New Hampshire Chapter group, starting and ending on the Kancamagus Highway. Another AMC winter trip was turned back by bottomless powder and fading daylight.

On a fourth visit, though we did not reach the summit, two friends and I ascended the prominent, 1950s-vintage slide above Mack Brook, one drainage west of the slide climbed by Clarke and Lanza, and dropped down to the top of the northwest slides for an expansive view over the Pemigewasset Wilderness. All these treks were enlivened by extended tussles with dense scrub and vexing blowdown.

The mountain was also the site of the first hiker rescue I took part in, an overnight endeavor in January 2004. A trio of descending bushwhackers, attempting to avoid dense spruce they had pushed through on the ascent,

ended up in the lower bed of the Scar's northwest slides. One of the group caught a crampon, tumbled down a frozen cascade, and suffered multiple leg fractures. Our litter crew emerged from the woods at 9:30 the next morning.[7]

Rediscovering Scar Ridge

My interest in Scar Ridge revived recently when I began researching the landslide history of the Sandwich Range and Osceola–Scar Ridge group of mountains. This southern tier of peaks is marked by some of the most prominent slides in the Whites. The seminal work on White Mountain landslides is the 1958 Duke University dissertation submitted by Edward Flaccus, *Landslides and Their Revegetation in the White Mountains of New Hampshire*. An excerpt from this work, "White Mountain Landslides," was published in *Appalachia* (December 1958, pages 175–191).

A small sign and canister holding a register mark the wooded west summit of Scar Ridge.
STEVEN D. SMITH

7 "Leg Fractures on Descent from Scar Ridge," by Mohamed Ellozy, Accidents Editor, *Appalachia,* 55 no. 2 (Winter/Spring 2005): 129–130.

In recent years I have visited slides many times in the southern Whites. On one such trip, I returned to the Mack Brook slide. On several others I climbed partway up the two northwest Scar Ridge slides (which are occasionally visited by adventurous backcountry skiers and ice climbers). My field research would not be complete without a pilgrimage to the slide ascended by Clarke and Lanza, the very one that gave Scar Ridge its name.

I studied recent Google Earth images, which revealed that vegetation has mostly reclaimed the old slide. One sizable patch of bare ledge remains. I glimpsed it from a deep snow platform on the north side of Mount Tecumseh. I scouted it from Little East Pond on a chilly November day in 2018, but a spooky expanse of blowdown lurking beneath neck-high spruce turned me back. Better to wait for the warmer, longer days of summer.

On a sunny morning in August 2019, I steered my Subaru Forester up Tripoli Road from I-93 to the East Pond trailhead, covering in fifteen minutes what it had likely taken Clarke and Lanza an hour or more to travel in their horse and buggy. Their route on the Thornton Gore road was located on the slope above and to the north of Tripoli Road.[8]

Much had transpired in Thornton Gore during the decades after Clarke and Lanza made their climb: the abandonment of the hill farms and their purchase by the New Hampshire Land Company, intensive logging by the Woodstock Lumber Company using the Woodstock & Thornton Gore Railroad (1909–1914), acquisition of the land by the U.S. Forest Service for the creation of the new White Mountain National Forest in 1915, and the construction of Tripoli Road by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. The area is now almost completely wooded.

After a short walk up the East Pond Trail, I turned left onto the Little East Pond Trail, following a branch of the logging railroad bed northwest for 0.7 mile. I saw several artifacts along the trail, most notably the piping from a gravity-fed water system that supplied a logging camp and a remnant piece of rail. (All historic artifacts in the WMNF are protected by law and should not be disturbed or removed.)

I left the trail at 2,200 feet, skirted below a WMNF logging cut, and crossed Little East Pond Brook. Just above here the brook splits into two branches. The northeast branch empties from shallow, secluded Little East

8 The route of the Thornton Gore road on the north side of Tripoli Road can be followed for two miles by experienced bushwhackers. It leads past numerous stone walls and the foundations, cellar holes, and wells of several farmsteads.

Pond, whose shore provides a wild view of the shaggy peaks of Scar Ridge. I began shadowing the northwest branch, which flows down from the old slide. From here, I would follow the footsteps of Clarke and Lanza to the top of Scar Ridge. This was about the point where they encountered the pile of gravel, rocks, and mangled trees that marked the bottom of the slide.

I did not expect to find easy going up the slide track. After 142 years of storms and blowdowns, the brook bed was no longer the open highway that Clarke and Lanza strolled up. A few hundred feet of weaving over and under fallen tree trunks, with slippery rocks underfoot, convinced me to take to the woods beside the brook, which were mostly bushwhacker-friendly at this lower elevation. For a short distance I followed what appeared to be an old sled road from the Woodstock & Thornton Gore Railroad. A weedy clearing had the look of a logging camp, but a quick search revealed no artifacts.

I returned to the slide track where possible, but it remained clogged with tree trunks and debris much of the way. As expected, the woods alongside took a turn for the worse in an extensive area of tall spruce with young trees and old blowdown beneath. For a short distance I walked a well-beaten moose path. In places it was as clear as a hiking trail, but no sane tramper would push a path through this savage tangle. All too soon the moose hoof-way veered eastward across the brook. Back to the slide track I went, concluding that ducking blowdowns was easier than wrestling through the adjacent throngs of clinging conifers.

For a few stretches the bone-dry, rock-strewn slide track opened up invitingly, and eventually the dense woods relented for easier passage along the edges. A stand of tall, stately spruce beckoned for a snack and water break. Higher up, I gave a wide berth to a spot where Google Earth had revealed a massive blowdown blocking the slide track. What would Clarke and Lanza, scientific men both, have thought of such technology, or of the GPS unit that was dutifully recording my squiggly meanderings?

The forest was fern-filled and friendly along the approach to the remnant bare rock slab of the slide, at an elevation of 3,150 feet. The bottom of the ledge was fringed with fragile moss, so, mindful of bushwhacking Leave No Trace principles, I detoured around through the woods. I emerged near the top of this water-stained sheet of bedrock, which was smooth but dry and grippy. A patch of white granite called for a long lunch break in the summer sun. The southward vista took in the nearby sprawl of Mount Tecumseh and distant peaks such as Kearsarge, Lovewell, Crotched, and the Pack Monadnocks. No wonder that when it was a fresh gash in the forest, this slide was a notable landmark from many points to the south.

Occasionally, slabs open up a view. STEVEN D. SMITH

The slab marks the bottom of the main part of the slide, where the pitch steepens. As Clarke and Lanza noted, "Here the real climbing began. . . . We began to realize that the mountain was a mountain, after all. . . ." The open rock provided me with clear climbing for 100 feet of elevation. Clarke and Lanza preferred the climbing on what was then a "bare, rocky slide" to the shattered rock on the more famous South Slide of Mount Tripyramid: "The broad sheets of gneiss we found here are far more satisfactory for climbing purposes than the loose stones and gravel at Waterville."

Above the open rock I found the slide track mostly cloaked in a maelstrom of vegetation, with an occasional patch of bare ledge. The plant life corresponded to the successional changes described in the Edward Flaccus dissertation on landslide revegetation. This being an old slide, the "pioneer" trees such as pin cherry and quaking aspen were long gone. Mountain ash, mountain holly, heart-leaf birch, and meadowsweet fringed the lower open patches. The upper slide was closed in by red spruce and balsam fir, the trees that dominate slopes above 3,000 feet.

The course of the slide could be followed even through the densest copses of conifers. Some of the ledges sequestered amid the trees bore rich carpets of sphagnum moss, giving the forest an almost prehistoric feel. These I refrained from stepping on, as in some places "leaving only footprints" is leaving too much. At about 3,550 feet I scrambled up two patches of loose shale-like scree: treacherous footing, but open enough for long views to the south. I was now high enough, as were Clarke and Lanza in 1877, to peer westward over a whale-backed southern spur of the mountain. Ahead, the slope looked appallingly steep and thick.

Loose rock, or scree, makes for treacherous footing but opens long views to the south.
STEVEN D. SMITH

At 3,600 feet I passed the uppermost vestige of the slide. From here to the top, Scar Ridge lived up to its reputation, presenting a 30-degree slope crammed with suffocating masses of prickly balsams. "Jail cell woods," some bushwhackers call it. Clarke and Lanza made no big deal of the scramble above the slide "through a few intervening rods of mossy evergreen woods and underbrush." Are the woods thicker today, or were those two made of sterner stuff?

I emerged on the eastern summit knob late in the afternoon, nearly two hours after leaving the open rock slab just 600 feet below. Clasped to a fallen tree was an older style Hundred Highest canister, made of white polyvinyl chloride and bearing the name and elevation of the mountain in green letters.

In 1977, the legendary peakbagger Gene Daniell (who served many years as both chair of the AMC Four Thousand Footer Committee and co-editor of the *AMC White Mountain Guide)* took "bushwhacker's license" and anointed this fairly sharp knob—the one climbed by Clarke and Lanza—as the "official" summit of Scar Ridge. Until then the flatter, less distinct west knob (marked with the summit elevation on the USGS map) had been the objective for Hundred Highest peakbaggers. Daniell[9] noted that "purists" might want to also visit the west knob, 0.3 mile away, but either the east or the west knob would count toward the Hundred Highest list. In recent years the west knob has once again become accepted as the "official" summit. The eastern bump is rarely visited nowadays, save by those traversing all the Scar Ridge peaks.

Clarke and Lanza were perhaps only the second party to ascend Scar Ridge, so they found no summit register at the top. But the placing of "Summit Cylinders," in which AMC trampers registered their names, dates back to the late 1800s. Some three dozen of the early Summit Cylinders are preserved in the AMC Archives.[10]

After a futile attempt to open the old canister, I descended through dense woods and blowdown to a small col, then climbed through a pleasantly open fir forest on the slope of the west knob. In 2017, the high winds of the "Halloween Storm" wreaked havoc with the trees on the south side of the Scar Ridge summit. I located the bright orange canister suspended high on a standing tree at the edge of the astounding blowdown. Underneath was a carved wooden sign, "SCAR."

The notebook inside the canister dated back to 2007. After I perused the contents, noting several familiar names, it was time to descend from the Scar. At 4:30 in the afternoon, returning via the time-consuming Clarke-Lanza route was out of the question. My way home would be by the current "standard" route used by Hundred Highest peakbaggers in summer: a bushwhack

9 Gene Daniell died on December 11, 2019. See tributes to him in the Summer/Fall 2020 issue (In Memoriam) and Winter/Spring 2021 (Letters).

10 See "The Register Cylinders of the Club," by Raymond M. Dow Adams, *Appalachia*, 11 no. 1 (June 1905): 40–47.

west across the ridge to the top of the Loon Mountain ski slopes, using a bootleg backcountry ski trail for the last section, then a long plodding descent along ski trails and service roads.

I had not traversed the route via Loon before but found the woods reasonably open much of the way. Unlike many of the increasingly popular Hundred Highest peaks, Scar Ridge, at this point, had no continuous, defined "herd path." Careful navigation was required to avoid "falling off" the ridge to the north or straying into the nightmarish blowdown to the south.

The evening views were stunning from the Walking Boss trail atop the North Peak of Loon, sweeping across the Franconia Range, the Bonds, and the Presidentials. Here my journey made a radical departure from the trek of Clarke and Lanza. Whereas they might have used mirrors to signal from the summit, I had a rarely used flip phone in my pack. I called my wife, just two miles away in Lincoln, and asked her to pick me up near dusk at the Loon Mountain base area and take me back to my car on Tripoli Road.

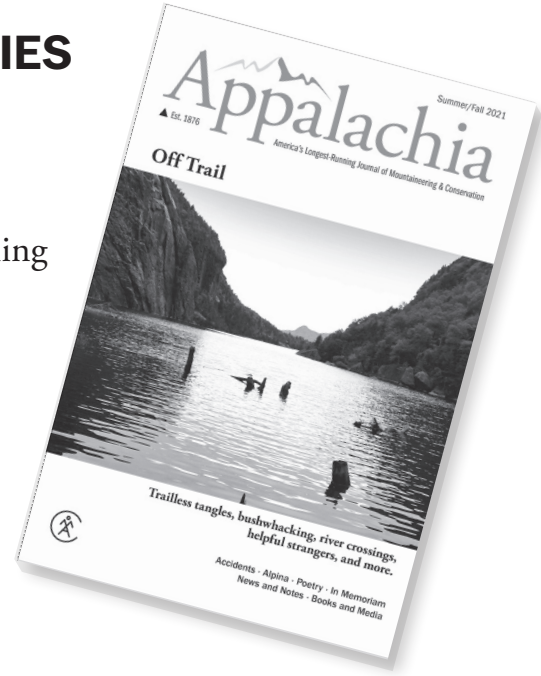
An hour-plus descent of the ski mountain completed my Scar Ridge traverse. I was honored to have followed the footsteps of those two stalwart AMC explorers. Though our experiences were markedly different, I heartily agreed with their conclusion: "On the whole, we could regard our trip as decidedly satisfactory."

Steven D. Smith edits the Appalachian Mountain Club's *White Mountain Guide* and is proprietor of The Mountain Wanderer, a bookstore in Lincoln, New Hampshire, where he lives.

"I started reading Appalachia *for the accident reports, but I kept reading for the great features." —Mohamed Ellozy, subscriber*

SUPPORT THE STORIES YOU LOVE!

Start or renew your *Appalachia* subscription today, and keep reading America's longest-running journal of mountaineering and conservation.



Visit **outdoors.org/appalachia** for a special offer: 36% off the journal's cover price. That's three years of *Appalachia* (6 issues) for only $42. Or choose a one-year subscription (2 issues) for $18—18% off the cover price.

Inside every issue, you'll find:

- inspired writing on mountain exploration, adventurers, ecology, and conservation
- up-to-date news and notes on international expeditions
- analysis of recent Northeastern mountaineering accidents
- book reviews, poetry, and much more

Subscribe today at outdoors.org/appalachia or call 800-372-1758.

BE OUTDOORS
APPALACHIAN MTN CLUB

Subscription prices valid as of September 2021. Prices and offers subject to change without notice. For the most up-to-date infio, visit outdoors.org.